The *Novas del Papagai*: Arnaut de Carcassès and the Eloquent Firebird*

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Papagai seems a simple poem, but the appearance of easy access is deceptive. True, it lacks the obscurity of diction, the extreme poetic self-consciousness, the implied audience of *cognoscenti* and the complex manuscript tradition that trouble the study of much Occitan poetry: but standard critical techniques for constructing a larger context of interpretation are quickly frustrated. With its rhyming octosyllabic couplets, its lexicon of gardens, jewels and languishing lovers, it reminds us of something we have met before, if not a fully fleshed-out romance at least a Breton *lai*. Yet a closer look points up the absence of the subsidiary adventures and the nuptial closure of the former, of the mystery and enchantments of the latter. It starts to seem fragmentary, unsatisfying in comparison, and we begin to suspect, from its plot – He is in love, but She is enclosed, so they divert the guards' attention and consummate their passion in the garden – that for all its fine appearance it is really just another *fabliau*.

But this is too cynical. He is a Prince, and She is a Lady in a castle, not some *bourgeoise* married to a loutish tradesman: that should count for something. The *fabliau* is not generically defined by the pattern of events alone. Reducing *Papagai* to such a structure fails to account for too much of the text, and putting it in such a genre suggests that it has a whole host of features which are in fact insistently absent. The characters behave too well, and the language is too refined; the action is not corporeal enough, and the anticipated audience response is benign amusement, not bawdy laughter. This poem could not seem anything but totally out of place in the company of *The Castrated Woman* or *The Knight Who Conjured Voices*.

Neither the absence of a generically-defined comparison-group nor the lack of other texts by this poet cuts off the possibility of placing *Papagai* in a useful larger context. Two other productive approaches remain. First, the poem has surface features analogous to elements in other roughly contemporaneous texts; examination of the similarities and the necessary differences helps to highlight Arnaut's particular significant choices. Secondly, from among the vast numbers of medieval texts assigned

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by scholars to disparate genres, it is possible to assemble a sub-group whose common core is not a set of formal features but a particularized response to audience desire.

Antiphanor – that is His name – makes his entry into the enclosing castle and the Lady – she remains nameless – thanks to a stratagem employed, at least in narrative, by several noteworthy medieval military men. To divert the attention of the guards, he sends a bird carrying Greek fire over the wall to kindle the roof and the tower; while they fight the blaze, the Lady unlocks the gate and admits him into her bed in the garden. In a characteristic world-wide search, a folkloric method uncovers a dozen or more analogous stories, ranging from the *Panchatantra* and the Russian *Chronicle of Nestor* to Samson and the foxes of Judges 15; in medieval Western Europe, the ruse is found in texts straddling the boundaries of romance, chronicle and *chanson de geste*. The surviving versions of Geoffrey of Monmouth say only that Gormond burned the city of Cirencester, but in the Welsh *Brut Tysilio*, in Wace's *Roman de Brut*, in Layamon's *Brut* and probably in the lost section of *Gormont et Isembard*, he fastens fire to the feet of sparrows which nest inside the city; the inhabitants, unable to extinguish all the fires, come outside and surrender.

Despite the similarity, *Papagai* no more belongs among the reflexes of this motif than in the company of *fabliaux*, and a comparison only – only! – makes us more aware of its uniqueness. Arnaut offers us not many birds, but one; not sparrows (or crows or pigeons), but a parrot, the medieval stock image of a creature which utters words without reference to their underlying spirit. He shows us not inside birds unknowingly carrying destruction home, but an outside bird intentionally invading; not an unquenchable blaze which leads to capitulation, but a fire which is quickly doused. Antiphanor's goal is not the permanent possession of the castle, but a momentary entry, an entry preliminary to and spatially, temporally and imagistically connected to his entry into the Lady.

The *corpus* of medieval romances, *lais* and romance-like *chansons de geste* abounds with texts whose narrative goal is the possession of the lady-and-the-castle. To awaken and win the love of the sleeping beauty Brianda, Blandin de Cornoalha must fight his way past the human and the monstrous guards left by her father and enter first the palace and then the tower which encloses the magic bird which unlocks the enchantment; the rich and impregnable castle of Monbrun and the beauty of the cold and aloof Brunissen will alike be Jaufre's, at the end of the tale, to dispose of as he sees fit. Guillaume learns from the escaped captive Gilbert about the marvelous Saracen city of Orange and the marvelous Saracen queen Orable and is inspired, through a series of *laisses similaires*, to a series of vows to win the lady and the city, the city and the lady, so intertwined that the audience knows throughout the subsequent descriptions of disguises and skirmishes that at the end he will be master of both – *La Prise d'Orange /d'Orable*.

Elsewhere, in fact, when poets create in their heroes and their audiences no territorial desires, they are giving clear signs that the amatory relationship will be temporary or at least subject to a lengthy interruption. Doon strives only to win the Lady of the Castle of Maidens, not the castle; after passing her tests, marrying her and impregnating her, he departs, despite her passionate entreaties to stay, and returns to her only after he has been defeated in combat, decisively but honorably, by their son. In *Richars li Biaus*, Louis scales a wall to spy on a beautiful maiden, enters her garden and rapes her as she sleeps; again despite her passionate pleas, he departs, and returns to marry her and take possession of her domain only years later, after a chance encounter with their son. The Gauvain of *Le Chevalier à l'Épée* only *stumbles upon*, rather than seeking out or being properly summoned to, the Castle From Which No Man Returns Alive, and is sent, against his will, to bed with a similarly dangerous young woman – as they lie together, she says "No knight will enter through this door and pull out of it alive" (545–46). Once he has successfully passed her father's test, he is offered the maiden and the lordship of the castle, but accepts only the maiden (776–79); shortly afterward, he loses her and returns, as always, to the life of a bachelor at Arthur's court.

Hence, in *Papagai*, the fire. Out of the seemingly endless list of possible diversions and deceptions, the tunnels and the cellar hideaways of *Eracle* and *Flamenca*, the moved cradles, disguises, the blind or foolish *fabliau* husbands with their timely absences or readiness to sleep in tubs or lofts, Arnaut chooses one physical element which is capable of being a lyric metaphor for the particular sort of desire at issue here. Initially, tenor and vehicle are separated, like the Lover and the Lady. He languishes for love (18) and dies for love (53), he longs for healing (21) and deliverance from sorrow (24); all that burns, at first, is the tower, the roof and the castle. The physical "'fire"' brought by the parrot and the more internalized "'of passion"' provided by Antiphanor, the "'incendium"' and the "'amoris,"' are united only for a few lines at the end of the poem, as the lovers lie together on a garden which seems like paradise (283) while the flames rage in the castle.

The lovers' climax occurs in line 284, "'Granz gaugz es entre lor mesclatz"' [there was great joy in their intermingling]. The fire of love and the fire in the castle are verbally equated only in line 285, at the moment of termination, "'E-l focs fo tost azamortatz"' [the fire was soon quenched/ done to death]. Lovers and fire are resolutely separated again in line 287, with the re-establishment of physically referential language: "'Ab vinagre-l fan escantir"' [they doused it with vinegar].[1]

[1] If we are willing to grant that "'they"' and "'it"' might have more than one referent, and to assume that Cathar distaste for procreation led to medical inventiveness, this line might be seen as evidence, otherwise lacking between Aëtios of Amida and 1832, of acquaintance with the spermicidal powers of

In effecting the coupling of the lovers, the yoking of the two elements of the metaphor and the ephemeral commingling of two genres, Lyric and Narrative, the Parrot has the biggest part. It – he, rather – performs a variety of functions which in other narratives would be assigned to several different characters. He makes possible the lovers' tryst by carrying in the fire, and like the watchman of the *alba* he warns them when it is time to part (291–93). It is he, not Antiphanor or the Lady, who devises the Greek fire plan, winning gratitude and admiration from the both: "'Mas yeu metrai foc a la tor/ Et al solier, per vostr'amor"' (156–57) [for your love/ for love of you, I will set fire to the tower and the roof]. He does *all* of Antiphanor's talking for him: the only hint that lover and lady have even seen each other before is his identification of Antiphanor as "'lo filhs del rey/ Que basti per vos lo torney"' (13–14) [the son of the king who gave the tournament for you]. When he first finds the Lady in her garden – significantly, there is no scene in which Antiphanor sends him there – he does, it is true, resemble a living love-letter, with his greeting from Antiphanor and his praise of his virtues (11-15), his request that she grant him her love to cure his languor (16-20) and send him a jewel (*joya*) to make him joyful (*joyos*). When the Lady is not instantly compliant, however, the Parrot takes it on his own initiative to meet and overcome her objections with a variety of arguments and pleas. The first 125 of this poem's 310 lines are devoted to this preliminary interview as the Parrot, playing the role of the wise old lady of *Eracle* or the experienced young maidservant of *Flamenca*, makes the case for his languishing master. He expresses shocked disbelief that the Lady does not already love the young lover (44–45), he argues against her protests that a woman should love only her husband (49–54, 77–81), and he adduces literary *exempla* – Blanchefleur and Floire, Iseult and Tristan, Thisbe and Pyramus – whose different sorts of total inappropriateness pass unnoticed (82–88). There is nothing especially persuasive in his reasoning or dazzling in his performance – indeed, the ease with which he wins his point and the line which compares him to a sparrowhawk (252) suggest some authorial awareness of the hit-and-run sexuality underlying the refinement of the whole encounter – but they are sufficient to impress the Lady; the words he speaks carry a force granted to them by the collective approval of such sentiments present in all the young men in the potential audience. The Lady finds him far too eloquent ("'Trop...enrazonatz,"' (32); "'trop es bel parlers,"' (55)), but soon is commenting positively on his courtly skills, saying "'if you were a knight, you would be very good at entreating the ladies"' (56–57) and sending him back to Antiphanor with a promise of love and a ring, the particular sort of *joya* which in everything from Breton *lais* to Rabelais betokens sexual possession.

acetic acid. See Norman E. Himes, *Medical History of Contraception* (Baltimore: Williams and Williams, 1936; rpt. New York: Schocken, 1970), pp. 94–96.

There is a corresponding diminution of the expected roles of the members of the human triangle, Antiphanor, the Lady, and the Husband. The heroes of romances and *fabliaux* and *lais* and *chansons de geste* are, more or less fully, *characterized*: by their appearance, their initiative, their speech or their actions. Any reduction in their power to act in the world, any loss of real control, is only a temporary setback to be followed by more efficacious striving and greater accomplishments. There is here, however, no narrative description, physical or moral, of Antiphanor; the Parrot's praise of his friend before the Lady is composed entirely of abstract and exaggerated generalities without any grounding in particular exploits. In all the poem's undertakings, Antiphanor follows the bird's lead: he speaks only four lines, three (163≠65) in which he assents to the Parrot's plan and one (296) in which, after the consummation, he asks the Lady for her orders. Similarly, there is nothing to correspond to the characterization of the Husband in *fabliaux* or in a romance like *Flamenca*, through the use of stock vocabulary of jealousy, through scenes with the young man or the wife, or through descriptions of any elaborate machinations to sequester his wife, safe from even the possibility of sexual contact with an unknown male. The Husband simply never appears, *does* nothing. Finally, in place of the elaborate romance description of the charms and virtues of a sweet sparkling-eyed blonde with delicately arched eyebrows and skin as white as snow, the *Papagai*-heroine's introductory portrait occupies three-eighths of a line; "'una don'" (5).

In the case of the Lady, however, the absence of features normally associated with the attractive female protagonist is not an accurate indication of her importance to the full action of the poem. In at least the narrative section of his work, Arnaut has not projected the function of opposition, of the necessary barrier to the lovers' fulfillment, onto the Husband. In place of the Dangerous Third, the personal agent of sequestration and resistance, he offers us the castle itself, whose walls can be circumvented by fire; the guards, whose attention can be diverted; and the Lady's initial high valuation for the marriage-bed, which can be overcome by eloquence. Her unreflective (untutored, unsophisticated) belief in a particular view of marital duties constituted the only ground for her initial resistance to the Parrot's proposition. She will listen to what he has to say, since he is so gallant (*prezentier*, 37), but "'How dare he!" suggest that she give a token of love to any man (33–36) when she loves the most accomplished man ("'lo pus aibit,"' 47) in the world, her husband. What she needs is to hear, apparently for the first time, about a different and competing set of attitudes toward love and marriage, from the courtly and eloquent bird:

"'Jes del marit non es razos
Que sía del tot poderos:
Amar lo podetz a prezen,
Apres devetz seladamen
Amar aquel que mor aman

Per vostr'amor, ses tot enjan'" (49–54).

"'It is never right for the husband to be all-powerful. You may love him openly, but then, secretly, you ought to love the one who is dying for your love, without deception."'

To win her over, the Parrot needs to tell her, repeatedly, but still only to *tell* her, that her view of the relationship between love and marriage is incorrect:

"'Dona, so vos dirai yeu be:
Amors non gara sagramen.
La voluntatz sec lo talen'" (62–64).

"'Lady, I will explain it to you clearly: Love has no respect for sacraments, but Will follows Desire."'

This lack of one-to-one correspondence between the players and the narrative roles directs the reader's attention to the set of motivational forces – actants, if you will – that underlie the poem. Like many another medieval text, *Papagai* responds to the socially-constructed personal desires of the young men in the audience. Rather than being structured by the generic norms of any of the established third-person narrative forms, however, these desires are mediated by abstractions more at home in the troubadour lyric: Desire, Danger, Fair Speech and Fairer Welcome, Joy and finally Worth.

For it is Worth, within the narrative at least, which is the enduring product of the coupling and the final goal of the action. No child is conceived, no life-long passion, no request even for a return engagement. Antiphanor is briefly saddened at their separation (294) and properly submissive to his Lady as he rises and asks her what she wishes to command him (295–96). Her reply shows that she has taken on yet another role. She has been the object of desire from the beginning; she has been converted from opponent to adjuvant by the Parrot's eloquence; now, by Antiphanor's love, she has been transformed into the inspiration of chivalric excellence:

"'Dona, que-m voldretz vos mandar?'"
"'Senher, que-us vulhatz esforsar
De far que pros, tan can poiretz,
En est segle tan can viuretz'" (296–99)

"'Lady, what would you like to command me?"' "'My lord, that you be willing to exert yourself as much as you can to act with prowess, as long as you live in this world."'

With that, Antiphanor can depart from the Lady and from the poem, like a Prince, "'Com filhs de rey"' (302). The poem's project, vis-à-vis the Lady, is complete; the combination of parrot-speech and lover-love has succeeded in transforming her from a resistant object of desire into an agent, and all her desires are now mediated by those of the male subject.

The ease with which abstracted desire, joy, worth and so on attach themselves to Antiphanor, the castle wall, the Lady, the Parrot, like free-floating uncathected

emotions, suggests a search for a unified organizing mind behind it all, a search which is not disappointed. We find it in Arnaut – "'Arnaut"', *Arnaut*, whatever – who appears, unnamed, in first person verbs, inside the action and, for that matter, the garden, eavesdropping on the critical first meeting of the Parrot and the Lady; "'Auzi contendr' un papagay/ De tal razo com ye-us dirai"' (3–4) [I heard a parrot making an argument of the sort that I shall tell you]. He reappears only at the end of the poem, naming himself and speaking of himself in the third person. There is no self-praise, no reference to his *poetic* skill or activity: he is simply the one who "'says"' the story (So dis n'Arnautz de Carcasses, 303). He tells us that the purpose of this saying was to teach a lesson (castïar, 305) to husbands who try to keep their wives sequestered.

It is difficult to believe that such husbands are to be considered the primary intended audience for this poem, or that they were present in the receptive audience other than as figments of the imagination of the young bachelors who thrived on stories such as this. There is simply nothing in the poem which speaks to the question of the "'jealous husband"' figure, no behavior pattern to be followed or avoided. This is not a work like *Castía Gilos*, in which the husband's unjustified mistrust of his wife actually causes her one act of infidelity. Any possible didactic purpose is completely lost in Arnaut's celebration of one young man's successful attainment of the goal desired by the true intended audience, the corps of *juvenes*. The narrative he has told them reinforces the belief that satisfaction of desire is both possible and licit; that women not only do not mind but actually enjoy brief, wordless, dangerous, no strings attached couplings in the bushes; and that such encounters make young men into better men and better warriors.

The poem's external generic signs, then – rhymed octosyllabic couplets, narrative, third-person description – are largely irrelevant to its status as an element of social discourse. When the narrator of *Richars li Biaus* describes Louis' rape of Clarisse in the garden, he anticipates no negative audience response: this is clear from the fact that Louis himself later relates the events in the first person to his son, as "'the best adventure that ever happened to him"' (3696–97), and Richard simply rushes to embrace him and takes him back to be reunited with Clarisse: *Papagai* is like a romance. In the *Lai de Doon*, the woman who has been won and wed and abandoned all in a week welcomes the hero back, without reproach, many years later: *Papagai* is like a *lai*. Similar attitudes are implied in first-person lyrics, like Guilhem of Poitiers' *Farai un vers, pos mi somelh*, with its exaggerated claims of prowess ("'One hundred and eighty-eight times!"') and, less self-confidently, at the end of *Ben vuelh que sapchon li pluzor*: *Papagai* is like a lyric.

What is important about *Papagai* in this company, then, is less its form that the particular way in which it arranges the various abstract desires, beliefs, capacities and functions among its characters. The most striking choice Arnaut makes, of course, is the expanded role of the Parrot – with whom, moreover, he identifies himself. The Lady says to the Parrot, "'If you were a knight, you would know well how to entreat the ladies,"' and Arnaut identifies himself as a man "'who has made many an

entreaty."' More than with any of the human participants, more than with the I who is the entreating lover of comparable lyrics, Arnaut identifies himself with the parrot, less an emissary than an emanation from Antiphanor, an abscinded agent of the mental, physical and verbal masculine power to penetrate boundaries, carrying the sparks of fire, the seeds of love and words of persuasive control.